CURRENTS

SUMMER 2026

A MOBILE BAYKEEPER PUBLICATION

Capt. Tom Yeager's cabin on Fly Creek, Fairhope

FEATURES

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A COVENANT OLDER THAN CLOCKS

Mobile is one of the nation's oldest cities, and its allergy to modern sheen accounts for a lot of its charm. The rich architectural fabric in neighborhoods like Oakleigh and DeTonti Square leaves visitors agape, and the city's arboreal character — most notably on display in the live oaks that canopy Government Street like great triumphant arches — eclipses even the Garden District of New Orleans.

But even for such a deeply historical city, much has been lost. The erection of Interstate 10 through downtown Mobile in the early '70s, and the opening of the George Wallace Tunnel, squashed remnants of the rich Creole culture that took root in the late 1800s in the Down the Bay community, an area that was previously home to Native Americans as far back as 2,000 years. And while Mobile's Black history is well documented and celebrated at the Africatown Heritage House and Historic Avenue Cultural Center, it is a history that is often sidelined when, in fact, it should be standing front and center.

This issue's cover story looks at Baykeeper's holistic oyster restoration project and our effort to revive the reefs that once flourished in our watershed. This is a story of history as much as ecology. Much of the restoration work is happening in Heron Bay near Dauphin Island, a pristine body of water that was once home to indigenous populations that sustainably harvested oysters for centuries.

Our ecological history is a living thing. It is not taught in history classes, but its lessons are essential.

Recent research suggests Native American tribes along the southern coasts had highly complex management practices when it came to oyster harvesting. These tribes harvested oysters at great levels and still the reefs thrived. And yet since 1950, we've managed to destroy an estimated eighty-five percent of the reefs in the Mobile Bay watershed — a sad and alarming metric brought on by stressors like predation by drills (small predatory marine snails), unsustainable harvesting practices, shell-dredging for construction materials, and ship-channel dredging.

The scientific literature indicates Native Americans had hierarchical systems in place about best management practices for oysters, and even pooled resources. Clearly, they worked together for the greater good to protect what was vital, even as there were competing interests — something the modern era has often failed to achieve.

Baykeeper's reef restoration is hoping to turn the tide and bring the community together for a common goal. "One of the encouraging aspects of the Oyster Restoration Project is that it is community-driven and led by a variety of stakeholders," says Baykeeper's Dr. Kayla Boyd, who heads the initiative. "This project is not only restoring ecosystem functionality, but it also provides support for the commercial oyster fishery."

That communal understanding comes with an appreciation of the sacredness of the natural world, and how critical its protection is to our own survival. It's an unspoken bond that goes back to a time before there were even words for it.

This issue closes with Susan Rouillier's poem, "Purple Martins Return to Bahia del Espiritu Santo." In the poem, she writes, "February twenty-eighth, precise and unannounced/ a covenant older than clocks, truer than our forecasts."

These are the covenants we are bound to and have a duty to protect.

— Caine O'Rear
Editor, CURRENTS

BEHIND THE COVER

ANCIENT WAYS Since the 1950s, it is estimated that Mobile Bay has lost roughly 85 percent of its oyster population. Mobile Baykeeper's Holistic Oyster Restoration Project, run by our own Dr. Kayla Boyd (pictured in back), aims to restore our oystery with the help of agency groups and wild oystermen like Michael Williams (pictured in front), who lives on Heron Bay, a body of water that supplied oysters for Native American tribes for thousands of years. Read more about the restoration project on page 32. *Cover photo by Caine O'Rear*

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Quills, Bream, and Grass

A CONVERSATION WITH DARREN SHIRAH

by **NICK WILLIAMS**

Darren Shirah has spent more than fifty years fishing the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, first as a boy riding with his uncle, and now as a retired angler who spends as much time on the water as he can. He's known to many through his YouTube channel, Reel Time Outdoors with Darren, where he shares the kind of knowledge that can only be earned over decades of paying attention.

What follows is a conversation about how that knowledge was built, what he's seen change, and why he keeps going back.

What are your earliest memories of fishing in the Delta?

My earliest memory ... I was probably eight years old, and it was my Uncle Eugene who carried me. I'd spend the night with him and we'd get up early and go. Steele Creek, Little Bayou John, Franklin's Creek ... We went a long way from where we started, and that's what I remember as a kid.

We fished with worms and crickets. He raised his own worms, and we'd buy crickets at Northside Bait and Tackle. It's reopened now, as Steele Creek Marina, under Josh Gunter.

Were there any lessons from your Uncle Eugene that stuck with you?

He showed me how to tie a knot. I don't even know what it's called, but I suppose it's some variation of a clinch knot. It was all I used for years until I learned to tie a Palomar knot, and I still use it today on small hooks.

He taught me to use a quill, too. I use a porcupine quill float to this day. And if I can't find them, I'll buy the quills online and make them into floats. The reason why he used the quill is that it is much more sensitive. The fish doesn't feel the drag when he pulls on it, and you can get away with a lot less weight. It'll stand up when your bait's off the bottom, and it lays flat when it's on the bottom. It gives you more information about what's going on with your bait.

You fish for a little bit of everything, but bluegill (bream) seems to be a really big part of what you do. What is it about them that's kept your interest all these years?

I never thought about that. That was my first love, you know? There's just nothing like a good bluegill bite. They're so aggressive, and they're plentiful. Ninety percent of the time, if you spend long enough out there — he may not be a giant — but he's going to stretch your string. Bream are willing to bite.

There's just nothing like that quill going down. Sometimes it's fast, sometimes it bobs a little and turns. Sometimes it'll just lay flat. It's just exciting. Then you pop it and he goes circling. Bream circle when they fight. I guess that would be the reason. I don't know. I just love them. I love catching them. I love to eat them.

Do you use a depth finder?

I never had one for most of my life. Even today, I don't really use one. I did get one on a boat recently, but I don't need it. I know where I'm at. I know how deep the water is where I'm at. I don't need a screen to know if it's twenty-foot deep because I already know it's twenty-foot deep. That might sound arrogant, but I've been doing this for fifty years.

I learned it by trial and error. You throw a worm out there and give it a countdown. You find out how deep it is. There are places in the Delta I'm not as familiar with, but most of it I've been in. I know. So that's my depth finder.

> "When there ain't no grass, there ain't no food."

When you think back over the years, what are the biggest changes you've seen in the Delta?

The most noticeable changes are the creeks that I used to go in, the sloughs that I used to go in, you can't get in them anymore. There's no water. It's filled in, silted in.

The fish population is not as good. The size of the fish is not as good. And there's less grass in the Delta, although recently it seems to be coming back a little. That is the biggest reason I think that the fish population has gone down in number and size because there's no habitat or no food source.

Grass brings grass shrimp. There's hardly any grass shrimp ... crustaceans, snails, which the shell crackers eat. Bream eat snails and grass shrimp. They live off the grass. Not the grass itself, but what grows in the grass and lives in the grass. And when there ain't no grass, there ain't no food.

There is still some grass, but it's not as much. So your sizes went down for that reason, and your numbers went down for that reason. That's my opinion. So that's the big change. It hurts my heart to want to go to spots that I used to fish and catch fish in three to six feet of water, and there is six inches of water. Or the grass is gone.

Do you have any sense of what's causing those changes?

I don't know for sure. I'm no scientist. But there's something wrong in the Delta. My theory is it's a combination of things. I think some of it is coming from upstream. We're the end of the drain, so everything ends up here. Industry, runoff, whatever it is, it's all coming down into the Delta. I can't prove that. That's just my opinion from being out there all these years. I just know it's different. Something's off.

You've started sharing your knowledge through your YouTube channel, "Reel Time Outdoors with Darren." What made you decide to do that?

My son-in-law is the one who pushed me to do it. He said I ought to start a YouTube channel and share what I know. I never thought of myself as having any kind of knowledge to share, but I do have a lot of years out there. I've learned a lot. I'm going fishing anyway, so I figured I might as well video it and show people.

It's grown more than I expected. People recognize me, come up and talk to me, ask questions. That's been surprising, but it's also been good.

When you think about the future of the Delta, what gives you hope? What concerns you?

What gives me hope is seeing young people getting into fishing. I see more of that, especially with bass fishing. That's encouraging. I'd like to see more kids out there fishing, just for fun. Not everything has to be about tournaments or big fish. Just go catch some bream. Catch something. Enjoy it.

What concerns me is the health of the Delta. The changes we talked about. The water, the grass, the fish. That worries me. Access is another issue. It's hard for people to get into the Delta without a boat, and that makes it harder to get new people involved.

For Darren, the Delta is a place you have to learn by being out there. Books and even videos cannot do the place justice. He knows it is not the same place it once was, but he has also seen enough to believe that there is still something worth passing along. — N.W.

Remembering Catawba

by **GRANT BLACKBURN**
illustration by **COURTNEY SPENCER**

Before Baldwin County developed the South Alabama Mega Site, before the world's largest aluminum recycler built a multi-billion-dollar plant there, and long before I ever considered what ethical hunting might be, I would get home from school, hop on my bike, and ride the mile or so from my house to a place we called Catawba, a thousand-acre block of young pine plantation north of Bay Minette that almost nobody used. There were a couple of guys who lived near the gate and hunted Catawba, but they knew me, and so long as I asked permission they would allow me to come and go as I pleased.

Catawba had everything I dreamed of as a young man: miles of logging road, creek bottoms, a dirt pit for shooting, a beaver pond for catching bass, and occasional poachers who made the woods feel lawless and wild. Before I could drive I would ride my bike through Catawba for hours with no agenda, no plan, and no phone. All I had to do was get home before dark. Catawba was where I first walked alone with a shotgun, where I first spoke to a turkey, and where I learned to hunt deer. My family moved to Montrose when I was in high school, but I would regularly make the drive to Bay Minette for an afternoon of hunting or wandering or bass fishing. That continued until I graduated and moved away.

Even after that, while I lived in Birmingham during college, I would routinely cook up excuses to come home and spend time at Catawba. My then-girlfriend (who is now my wife) killed her first deer there while we were home one winter. That taught us that my wife is not a deer hunter. When my college friends learned of Catawba's proliferating whitetails, they'd come to Baldwin County over holiday breaks from Birmingham and Demopolis and Ponte Vedra, Florida, to set up deer camp and hunt for days. More than one of my friends took his first deer there, and one of my most reliable fishing buddies, who now lives in Atlanta, still has a Catawba buck on his wall that he took almost twenty years ago.

As a college-aged deer hunter, my conservation ethic was suboptimal and my goal was often to see how much meat I could put in the freezer. I didn't waste what I killed, but it is fair to say that my friends and I were motivated by immature bloodlust and the false belief that the number of deer we killed was directly proportional to our abilities as "outdoorsmen." I can thank Catawba for correcting those deficiencies in my character, and unlike other philosophical gains in my life, this one did not happen gradually. Catawba straightened me out all at once in the cold sunrise of a January morning.

Several college friends were visiting Baldwin County during winter break in what was probably 2007 or 2008, and the hunting was excellent. By that time I knew how the deer moved through Catawba, and, for some reason attributable to juvenile overzealousness, I became determined to kill a deer at extremely close range. My thought process was the closer I could get to a deer, the better a hunter I'd prove myself to be. My plan was to strut proudly into camp, and to tell my friends that I had to lean back to make room for the shot.

I made my way to a reliable creek bottom an hour before first light, camouflaged myself against a tree, and waited. The air was still and

cold, but also humid and damp, and the creek bottom smelled like pine needles and tannic water. Time passed slowly and the necessity of my absolute stillness meant that all I could do was think. I do not remember what I thought during the hour that I waited for the sun, but I do remember that when I heard the crack of straw over my shoulder, I doubled down on my plan, readied my gun, and waited for my shot.

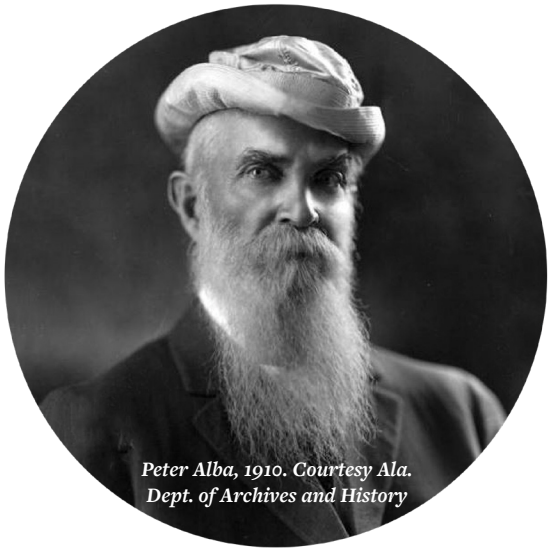
An old doe was approaching cautiously from my left on a track to pass about five yards in front of me. I remember having no doubt about my intentions until the deer stopped broadside directly in front of me. At that precise moment the first rays of morning sun broke through the hardwoods behind her. She was suddenly cast in the golden light of a winter morning, and her details were instantly burned into memory. All these years later, I remember the scene with great clarity, right down to the angle of the shadows made by the light on her face. I saw dew on her whiskers and the heat of her breath fogging the morning air. I could see the individual hairs on her nose and the hesitant glances in her eyes. Her leg muscles rippled beneath a winter coat, and in that instant my plan fell apart. I watched her for as long as I could, and as she walked away I sat, stupefied, wondering what had happened to me.

That brief encounter taught me that hunting involves an exchange, and that harvesting a game animal is not simply an act that precedes meat going in the freezer. It is a transaction involving mutual give and take. The deer gives its life and a hunter takes it, but what does the hunter give in return?

Until that morning at Catawba my answer to that question, had I thought to ask it, would have been, "nothing." I'm not sure that we as hunters can give anything to balance those scales when the measure of success is death, but now, if nothing else, I consciously give my respect each time I hunt. This goes beyond philosophical lip service. Pragmatically it means having a commitment to marksmanship and taking ethical shots. But, I think more fundamentally, it means entering the woods with some degree of reverence, and an appreciation for everything that lives there. These demonstrations of respect may nevertheless be inadequate, but they are the best way I have found to balance the ledger of the hunter's exchange.

The deer gives its life and a hunter takes it, but what does the hunter give in return?

It wasn't until I had a son and daughter of my own, and Catawba was long gone, that I understood how I had taken the place for granted. Today Catawba is part of the South Alabama Mega Site. The bass pond is beneath a rail spur and the logging roads accommodate commercial traffic. Although I miss the wild pine woods of my youth, I am grateful for the benefits Catawba will bring to north Baldwin County in its new form. The place where I let that old doe walk sits in an undisturbed corner of the site where the creek still flows, and where, I am sure, the deer still come and go every day.



Peter Alba, 1910. Courtesy Ala. Dept. of Archives and History

CAPTAIN PETER ALBA

SOLDIER, SERVANT, AND STEWARD OF THE GULF COAST

by **SUSAN ROUILLER**

When we think about the deep roots of south Mobile County — the bayous, the oysters, the salt-kissed winds that shape lives — we should think also about the figures whose lives helped shape it, too. One such man was Peter Francis Alba (1833–1915), a name that may be familiar to many around Bayou La Batre, Coden, and Dauphin Island, but whose story deserves to be told with the full weight of its humanity: a life of service, struggle, and generosity that rippled across generations.

The Early Years

Peter was born in Pensacola, Florida, in 1833, but his family moved to Mobile when he was still a child. Growing up in Mobile, young Peter was steeped in the culture of the Gulf Coast — its creeks and marshes, its rhythms of tide and trade, its people forged by sea and soil.

From an early age he showed the courage and resilience that would mark every chapter of his life. He was drawn westward in the mid-1800s, becoming what was then termed an "Indian fighter," serving on the frontier alongside officers who would later be famous in Civil War annals — among them Robert E. Lee. In those years Peter encountered hardship, danger, and the brutal realities of frontier conflict.

The Civil War

But his fight did not end there. When the Civil War came, he answered the call — not as a boy, but as a seasoned man. He served as a Confederate cavalryman, riding with determination born of unwavering loyalty to the community he called home. The war, with all its devastation, marked him deeply, as it did so many of his generation.

What is remarkable about Peter Alba is that his story does not stop with the battlefield. In many ways, that was only the beginning.

A Life of Care

After the war, he returned to civilian life in Mobile and evolved into a popular and prosperous businessman. He was famous for his ability to handle horses and studied veterinary medicine. He also ran a livery stable and "Alba's Pasture" for the care and boarding of horses near downtown Mobile. He traveled the world and shipped exotic horses from overseas home to Mobile.

He became what some today might call an *undertaker* — a profession that in the late nineteenth century was not just about burial services, but about care, ritual, and compassion at life's most tender threshold. In a city still healing its scars from conflict, his work offered respect and dignity to those passing through sorrow. As if all this is not enough, he became a cabinet maker and served as the City Sexton for Mobile in 1890 and 1891. He established Mobile Transfer Company (a baggage handling company), was king of the Mobile Carnival festival in 1875, and was instrumental in forming the Mobile Humane Society.

The Coden Villa

But Peter's heart was not only invested in solemn duties. He prospered enough to build and own handsome properties, including his villa in Coden, an area that in the late 1800s and early 1900s was gaining a reputation as a seaside haven. His villa wasn't just a place

Alba Club on Dog River, 1920s. Courtesy Ala. Dept. of Archives and History

of comfort — it became a part of the cultural fabric of the community, a landmark where stories were shared and connections made.

A Commitment to Education

Peter had a deep belief in the power of community and education — not just for some, but for all children of this coast. In 1919, several years after his death, that belief bore fruit in a very visible, very meaningful way. Land that Peter had owned was donated for the construction of a Rosenwald school — the Grand Bay Elementary School for Colored — a school built to provide educational opportunities to African American children in an era when segregation and inequality made such opportunities very scarce. Today a historical marker stands at the site where the original Rosenwald School once stood, 11610 HW 90, a quiet witness to the hopes of a community that believed deeply in the power of learning.

His donation of that parcel of land was not just a gesture; it was a commitment to the future of a community that deserved dignity and hope. The school, built with funds from the Julius Rosenwald Fund in partnership with local citizens, stood as the eleventh Rosenwald school in Alabama, a testament to local investment in education and racial uplift. The Grand Bay School, built on Alba's property, consisted of five large rooms, three of which were used for primary through seventh-grade classes. The other two rooms served as living quarters for the teachers.

At a time when few white landowners were willing to take such a step, Peter Alba's decision was a quiet but powerful act of generosity. It acknowledged the worth of every child's education and helped provide a foundation for generations to grow, learn, and aspire beyond the restrictions of their circumstances.

The Places That Bear His Name

His contributions to education did not stop there. Across south Mobile County today, the name "Alba" lives on in schools such as Peter F. Alba Middle School in Bayou La Batre, a thriving institution that educates and nurtures young minds, drawing on the heritage of a man who believed in building up community through thoughtful investment in young people. The Alba name is also woven into the history of Alba High School, which served this region for decades before consolidations and renaming eventually became part of the evolving landscape of Mobile County education.

But beyond land donations and school names, Peter's legacy extends into the very land we touch here on the coast. In the decades after his passing, Peter's heirs and family holdings helped catalyze community growth in places like Alba Beach, a stretch of shoreline on Mobile's western shore, named in recognition of the family's presence and contributions to the region.

His influence also spread into land given for churches, civic gatherings, and other community uses in the area around Coden and Bayou La Batre — lands that helped sustain community cohesion through the twentieth century and into today.

In many ways, Peter Alba was an embodiment of the contradictions and aspirations of his era: a soldier of a fractured nation, a businessman, a caregiver, a landowner, and a benefactor who believed in education and community. He lived through war and peace, through reconstruction and modernization, and in every chapter found a way to anchor himself to this coast, to its people,

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and to the promise of what lay ahead.

A Dignified Tribute

Captain Alba passed away in 1915, two days before Christmas. His funeral was conducted in the Cathedral-Basilica of the Immaculate Conception by the Bishop of the Mobile diocese, Rev. Edward P. Allen. Graveside services were conducted by Rev. Father Gerow. Prayers were said by Father Kennedy, Pastor of his church in Bayou La Batre. A Confederate Flag was draped over his coffin. Joseph Hermann Jr., bugler for the Raphael Semmes camp, played "Taps" and camp drummer Louis Rafield sounded the last tattoo. Members of the camp led the riderless horse-drawn muffled-drum procession for two miles, from the Cathedral to Magnolia Cemetery, where he was buried beside three of his children who died before him.

His Legacy on the Coast

One can imagine him riding the trails as a young cavalryman, the calm breeze of Mobile Bay on his face; later, standing beside a schoolyard where children played; later still, sitting on the porch of his Coden villa watching the slow arc of Gulf sunsets. In every scene there is continuity: a man rooted here, committed to the land and its people.

Today, when educators at Peter F. Alba Middle School speak of their school's mission, when students walk the hallways in Bayou La Batre, when families enjoy a morning at Alba Beach or drive past Alba Road and the sites that bear his name, they are touching facets of a legacy that began with one man's conviction that investments in land and in children have the power to shape a community's destiny.

His life reminds us that the courage of heroes can be found in the choices they make after wars have ended. Peter Alba's courage was in his commitment to a future that valued learning, dignity, and shared space. And for that, south Mobile County still carries his name with respect and affection.

A day's catch on porch of a Coden villa, 1905. Courtesy Ala. Dept. of Archives and History

Rosenwald school for African American children, 1919. Courtesy Fisk University

SAVE IT NOW

FOR FIVE GENERATIONS, THE GREER FAMILY HAS BEEN STEWARDS OF MOBILE BAY. THEY FEAR THEY'RE LOSING THE WATERS THEY'VE LOVED.

by **VIRGINIA KINNIER**
photos by **CAINE O'REAR**

Janice Greer at Sunny Cove, on the western shore of Mobile Bay

When Janice Greer looks out the front windows of her home overlooking Mobile Bay, she sees much more than brown waves and wooden wharves stretching out to the blue horizon.

At 97 years old, her eyesight may be dimming, but her memories are crystal clear, and she literally wears a timeline of them around her neck. A 70th wedding anniversary gift from her husband, Jack Greer, Sr., the necklace tells the story of their life together: where they met, where they got engaged and married, every detail permanently etched on a medal just as the memories are in her mind.

Today, as she looks out on the same scene that served as the backdrop of all those memories, she is surrounded by the living legacies of their marriage —their four children, Jan, Jackie, Tutta, and Moo — and her mind is never far from Jack.

"I see him everywhere here," Janice says.

Here refers to their 90-acre bayfront property, more affectionately known as Sunny Cove by the now five generations of Greers who have shared it over the past 100 years. The property was originally purchased in 1926 by Jack's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Barton Greer, as a summer home for the family. It has remained with the family ever since.

Theirs is a love story that spans seven decades, first rippling out with their four children followed by 12 grandchildren and now 25 great grandchildren. While the faces have multiplied over the years, the setting of their love story has remained the same: Sunny Cove, Mobile Bay.

Janice met Jack when she was 15 years old, nearby at the Alba Club on Dog River, and soon after she started spending all her time with Jack at Sunny Cove. "They were actually engaged on the bayfront in the original summer house, although it no longer exists because it was gobbled up by a hurricane," Janice's daughter, Tutta, explains.

While Sunny Cove has its fair share of hurricane scars, parts of the original house can still be found if you know where to look, as Jackie Greer, the only son of Janice and Jack, Sr., points out. "Where part of the original ceiling goes out that way, this was a screened-in porch that kind of went around both sides where we slept in the summer."

When Jack's parents owned the property, his father used to ride the now-defunct Bayshore Train every Monday morning into work at what would become a very successful family business, Autry Greer & Sons (now Greer's Markets), and back again on Fridays to join his wife and four children for the weekend at the Bay. When his parents got older, they passed the Bay house down to their two sons, Jack and Bartee, who carried on the Greer family tradition of summers spent down the Bay with their own children.

"We would take our shoes off when school let out in May and put them back on after Labor Day," Jackie laughs.

Regardless of shoes, days at the Bay were full speed.

"A typical day for me would be getting up before the sunrise, the birds would wake me up because we were sleeping on the screened-in porch," Jackie recalls with a smile. "I'd slip out the door, walk out on the wharf, watch the sunrise, and come back to feed our horses that were right next door. After that it was fishing, crabbing, throwing out handsewn cast nets, skiing, and swimming. Even the horses would come out and swim with us. We ended each day with music, either singing out on the wharf or inside while the kids sat on top of the upright piano listening to our aunt play."

Like most places on the water, the years are dictated by storms. When one of the worst ones took its aim at Mobile Bay, Jack Greer felt the loss and dug his heels in harder.

"When Hurricane Frederick hit in 1979, we lost 150 trees, and it tore up the front of the house," Janice recalls. "Jack stood out there staring at the loss, and he said, 'I'll patch it up, and we'll just go home.' I looked at him and said, 'You really want to go home?' But I knew he was not wanting to leave. This was home."

With that decision made, Jack and Janice renovated what was left of the summer house and moved

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The Greer Family: (left to right) Moo Martindale, Tutta Cone, Janice Greer, Jack Greer, Jan Endfinger

down the Bay permanently. Up until then, for 53 years, it was just a summer house. But for Jack, it was always so much more.

"Dad always had a master plan," recalls Moo Martindale, the youngest of Jack and Janice's children. "He was going to build a lake, which he completed when I was in third grade. Then he built Mama the big house by the water, and then he added tennis courts. He was a big traveler, and he always wanted a family chapel, like the ones he saw in Europe, so he built one right here at Sunny Cove. He was a man of many projects, and over time the village he envisioned evolved into what it is today, with the chapel he relocated from Coden and reconstructed on the property, as well as a 100-year-old schoolhouse, the original Toulminville schoolhouse built in 1859, where his grandfather and six siblings attended elementary school."

While Jack brought his vision to life at Sunny Cove, another vision was soon revealed by local businessmen and chemical companies to transform the western side of the Bay into an industrial park, one main goal being the construction of the world's largest sewage outfall pipe that would empty directly into Mobile Bay. As word spread, local neighbors banded together to save their little corner of the world.

"Everyone who was for the development of this industrial complex down here told them they weren't going to be able to stop what's going on," Jackie remembers. "Well, for my dad, that was just sort of a challenge."

Jack became the first Chairman of the Board of the newly formed West Bay Watch, and the group hired a lawyer who went to work with them fighting for the Bay, even when it meant they were fighting against friends and fellow Mobilians at powerful places like the *Mobile Press Register* and the Chamber of Commerce. The case made it all the way to the Alabama Supreme Court, and in an unprecedented victory at that time, the Bay won.

Ten years ago Jack shared a few words about his experience with his friends at Mobile Baykeeper, the descendant of Mobile Bay Watch and the organization he helped found following the success of their trial. "It wasn't a popular decision at the time, but we knew it was what we had to do. None of us were really environmentalists; we were just normal people who cared about the Bay, our seafood, our property value, and our quality of life. After a while, I think the chemical companies decided this area was a tough one to fight. People here love their homes, and they love Mobile Bay."

While it was an enormous victory, the trial did not end the environmental threats to Mobile Bay. Over 30 years later, the Greers are still carrying the weight of growing concerns regarding development of the area.

"I think right now we're most concerned about the ongoing dredging to make the channel deeper to get all these bigger ships in," Janice's daughter, Jan, says. "They're not thinking about what these ships do to the bayfront. When those waves come in, they are massive."

Moo adds, "And it's not just the size — there's also so many more waves because of the bigger, heavier ships. So it's a real concern over here because the channel is closer to this side. It has really destroyed the bayfront."

With the loss of the bayfront comes the loss of so many unseen treasures of the Bay. "I would hate for kids to miss what the Bay is really about: the shrimp, the crab, fishing, throwing your line out,

"If we don't save it now, the Bay will be gone. Every year is a little worse than the last. They dredge all the time; the water is muddy all the time."

— JANICE GREER

skiing," Jan says. "Now there are legitimate concerns about even putting a foot in the water, and with that you lose so much of what life down here is."

When asked about any changes to the water itself, the answer is as clear as the water once was.

"Back then it was all grass beds, and the water was beautiful," Jackie remembers. "We could just walk along the wharf and see groups of mullet swimming in big schools. And then at night, when you were floundering, you were standing in grassbeds."

Tutta recalls, "We used to have clay that we called blue mud. We made all kinds of little pots that we let dry in the sun. We don't have that anymore because the beach is just ... gone. We used to be able to walk all the way up the beach to Fowl River and back, picking up driftwood. It was just the joy of all the pieces and parts along the bayfront, the sand, the shells."

Aside from a pretty view and artistic inspiration, the Bay provided real sustenance as well.

"So many people fed their families with flounder and shrimp and crab and whatever else they could catch from the Bay, but you don't see any of the fishing boats coming and going anymore," Moo points out. "A lot of people think of it as just the sunrises and the sunsets, and they don't understand the real value. Until you can see it every day, like Mom and Dad did, you can't understand what's at stake. Dad would write poems about each day on the Bay. One day it would be about walking out to the end of the wharf on the sandbars, and the next day it would be about the tide being up, splashing right against the bluff. And if you don't know the Bay and how dynamic it is, you don't know what something like that outfall pipe could have done to our Bay."

While Janice's heart carries concern over the future of this area, it is also full of gratitude for the past.

"My life has been a love story from about the time I was 16 years old," she says. "Everything Jack and I did was together. I see him everywhere I look. He's here, every day. You can't touch something without knowing he was here."

The very walls of their beloved home pay homage to Jack's family and how they spent their time here for generations. A grand fireplace made of cobblestones Jack's father salvaged from the streets of downtown Mobile stands in the main living area, accompanied by a giant ship wheel that hangs like a chandelier, a souvenir from one of Jack's father's travels and a nod to his maritime service. Family photographs peek out from every surface, a tangible scrapbook that tells the story of the Greer family's 100-year history here. Many of the frames hanging on the walls were handmade by Jack's father from driftwood he collected on the shores right outside his home. Even the lamp that lights the main sitting room is more than meets the eye; the wooden base was handmade by Jack from driftwood found on the shore.

"Mom's done a good job of carrying on Dad's legacy," Jackie says proudly. Not only has Janice remained staunchly committed to life down the Bay, she continues to welcome people with open arms to Sunny Cove, inviting church groups and children's groups to explore the village or celebrate special occasions like weddings, baptisms, and reunions, and every December she hosts Christmas at the Village, an annual Christmas celebration at Sunny Cove Village for friends, neighbors, and the community filled with lights, music,

and cheer.

"Her health has been a blessing, but her eyes are our main problem. I tell everybody she can't see well, but she doesn't miss much," Jackie laughs.

And she is paying close attention to what is happening right outside her door.

"We're on a precipice," Janice admits. "If we don't save it now, the Bay will be gone. Every year is a little worse than the last. They dredge all the time; the water is muddy all the time."

When asked what her husband would say now if he could see the changes to his Bay, she says with a laugh, "He wouldn't say it quietly, I can tell you that."

When Jack was in the hospital in the final days of his life, all he wanted was to go home to the Bay. "Roll me out to the Bay," he said. He just wanted to see it one last time.

"We were able to do that for him, give him one last day on his Bay," Tutta says with a smile.

As Janice begins another summer down the Bay, the sun will shine bright on Sunny Cove and the memories that line its walls will continue to keep her company, even in the absence of her beloved companion, who will forever live on through the humble devotion of a self-proclaimed "normal person who cared about the Bay."

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Pleasure Bay

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF CAPTAIN TOM YEAGER

by **RACHEL BALL**
photos by **COURTNEY MASON**

I'm driving through lush piney woods until I find a small clearing in the trees. If I hadn't been looking for it, I would have missed it. The clearing is the start of a driveway. I turn into it and bump and twist along until I come to a slow stop in front of Captain Tom Yeager's home, nestled in the treetops. Tom saunters out, barefoot and brandishing a lilac bandana around his neck. His deep, honey-coated voice calls out, asking if I want to come inside for tea. We start climbing the stairs over his boathouse until we reach the top deck overlooking Fly Creek. Tom opens the door and subtle notes of pine and cypress greet my nose as he leads me into the living area that seems to be bursting with stories of Tom's life as a captain and Port of Mobile harbor pilot.

I soon pass under a small staircase that reminds me of one you would find in a boat and that leads to Tom's studio bedroom and then into a rustic kitchen with an iron stove and open shelves spilling with ceramic dishes. As I sit at the kitchen counter, Tom puts a kettle on the stove. He has snacks laid out in front of me in little dishes shaped like canoes. He wanders over to the fireplace and begins starting a fire. I'm admiring the ironstone fireplace creating the perfect contrast to the knotty cypress walls, and Tom tells me he found every stone in the fireplace. In fact, everything in this living room was made from things he found. The windows are all reclaimed. The sleek rocking chair and cozy couch are made from cypress logs found on the beach. The coffee table is made out of a piece of cypress so big the sawmill wouldn't cut it.

Tom recalls, "Well, I had just bought a new chainsaw, why don't we quarter it? We started on one end and popped a line and sawed it all the way across and inside. Anyway, that tree was over 1,000 years old, based on the rings."

The floors are made out of long-leaf, yellow pine, a 200-year-old tree that had been in the water since the turn of the century — back when they were pulling the trees out with mules and trying to float or pull them down the shallow creek, which wasn't dredged until the '40s.

When Tom was putting his pilings in, his crane guy would bump up and pull out these 30-foot-long sinker logs and Tom turned them into the stunning living room floors I'm standing on now. Tom says he learned woodworking through osmosis from boat-builders. Herbert Foster, who lived at the foot of Pier Street, built boats there at the turn of the century — from shrimp boats to the prams Tom sailed as a kid.

Early Times

Tom grew up at his mom's house on Pier Street. Her name was Dorothy, but everyone called her Dot. Everyone came to Dot's house on Sundays to hang out and admire the Bay, but Tom likes to say, "I slept on my mama's porch, but I lived in the Bay."

He and his dog Boo-Boo, an Irish Setter and Black Lab mix, would get up at daylight and not return until dark. They'd hit the beach and Boo-Boo would wade up to her chest in the water, pointing at schools of fish. Mr. Lee, the butcher, would call out to them, "What are you and Boo-Boo doing this morning?" "Oh, we're catching mullet," was Tom's usual reply, knowing Mr. Lee wanted to throw a net with them.

When Tom swam, he'd try to stay on the top of the water and not disturb the seagrass beds. He wore these little goggles because "the seagrass beds were like a coral reef. There would be a stingray or crab

The ironstone fireplace Tom built from stone he harvested

Inside the cabin

Rachel Ball and Tom Yeager

or flounder. Everything lived in it, you just can't believe. That ribbon grass was over a foot tall so it just flowed around. It was unbelievable, really. You just never dreamed it would disappear, you know."

The Houseboat

I spot an old photograph of a houseboat on the wall and Tom starts telling me the story behind it. Tom's father was good friends with Levine Berglin. The Berglins were one of the founding families in Fairhope and owned Azalea Creamery, making ice cream and milk in downtown Fairhope.

One day when Tom was five, Tom's father and Levine came into Fly Creek with a barge and a paddle wheel and tied it up at the yacht club. The next day, they put picnic tables and umbrellas on it and took off to Fish River. They brought a couple of ski boats so everyone was out skiing and running around and they had a grill and food and coolers on the barge. Herbert Foster designed and built a house on the barge, turning it into a houseboat.

Tom smiles as he says, "Levine, my father, and all these men I grew up with, they fought in World War II. So when they came home, they didn't have the word for PTSD, but what they did do? They partied every weekend."

For years, they'd take the houseboat up to the Delta to hunt and fish. To a 6-year-old Tom, the 65-foot houseboat felt 1,000-feet long. They named the houseboat "Pleasure Bay" and when Levine passed away, he left it to Tom.

The houseboat is what Tom lived in when he was building his boathouse on the creek.

The Bungalow

After visiting the houseboat, Tom takes me across a deck as he leads me to a little bungalow sitting in the trees, and I feel like I'm walking amongst the clouds.

Right now, he has an Argentinian photographer, Matias, staying in the bungalow while Fairhope Yacht Club is hosting the US Optimist Team Trials. The bungalow has also inspired some of Tom's artist friends, like musicians Molly Thomas and Ken Rose, who together wrote much of Molly's latest album, *Tumble Home*, while visiting Tom's magical place.

As we meander back to the main house, I'm thinking about the idyllic way Tom grew up and can't help but wonder if the magic of that childhood is still alive. Was he able to impart those kind of experiences to his daughters, Jessica and Catie? Tom tried to give them a childhood like his. "We were in the Bay every day," he says. "There was nothing we weren't doing on the water. If we weren't sailing or traveling on the sailboat, we had a motorboat and we were off to Sand Island or Petit Bois. I would set Jessica down and she would crawl right to the Bay — one with the turtles."

The Little Pink Boat

Back at the house, Tom points to a photo of two little girls in a tiny, pink wooden boat. "That little pink boat we built for them when Jessica was four," he says. "This is them on Christmas morning with it. We made those little oars there too. They were little and small, so we made everything small so they could handle them. We'd pull this little boat behind our sailboat when we'd travel. I grew up on the Bay and I am just a complete boat lover, you know. We sailed everywhere. They loved it. The only time I ever heard them cry or get upset is when I told them we were going back home."

Clearly, Tom passed down the boat-lover gene to his daughters: Jessica is a waterwoman and Catie sails in regattas, most recently winning the 2025 RS Aero Women's North American Championship held at the Fairhope Yacht Club.

Tom can't overstate how important nature is in childhood, saying, "I think it's the most important education you will ever get. Connect-

ing with nature is everything. It's true love. We're one with it all. It gives every day to us. It doesn't stop. Even though we mow it down and destroy it, it keeps on giving. It's a beautiful place here, I'll tell ya. It's a sacred place." I'm not surprised to hear Tom say this, seeing as he graduated from the Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education.

Turtles All The Way Down

Tom and I head back downstairs and under the boathouse. It's time to feed the turtles as they're sitting on a huge cypress log. Tom tells me that log has been tied there for more than 20 years. He found it on the beach, back when Scott Paper was logging with a helicopter up in the Delta, and dragged the log home, just as he did with the logs he turned into furniture upstairs. Tom left this particular log tied up, and the next day, "Turtles were up on it, then this alligator gets out and is sitting with the turtles. They were nose to nose. I was like, well, okay, that's going to be y'all's log."

We settle down to feed the turtles and I notice the little pink boat from the photograph Tom showed me. It's sitting next to a wooden rowboat that Tom tells me is a replica of a Magnolia rowing skiff. It's made of juniper and heart pine, the same pine as the living room floors I was standing on upstairs. Tom rows that boat every evening at sunset.

While the turtles enjoy their meal, Tom fills the easy silence with more stories: of the ospreys who hang out here every day; of the manatees who came up here one time and hung out right under the boathouse; of the beavers and otters who come out every night; of the sound of mullet jumping at night; and of the time he met a married couple, Rick and JoAn, in St. Petersburg and figured out they were both sailing back to Alabama. Rick and JoAn opened Anchor Down Boatworks in Josephine and have been friends with Tom ever since.

The Cypress Trail

Now that the turtles are fed, Tom wants to take me around what he calls the "Cypress Trail." Tom started clearing trails on his land for his four-year-old grandson, Jack. We leave the turtles and start on our walk in the woods. As we're walking, Tom points out all the little cypress trees he's planted. They have wire fences around them to keep the beavers away. We're walking along the creek, towards the artesian well that flows behind the boathouse, with just the sounds of the birds singing and Tom's melodic voice. Tom intermittently stops to smell the Cherokee Roses that are blooming along the trail. He points out a 50-year-old pine tree that got struck by lightning during Hurricane Sally and tells me how he's going to turn it into a bridge to go over the slough where we're standing.

We get to the artesian well and I feel like I'm somewhere far away from Fairhope, deeply surrounded by nature until Tom points in the direction of the road that took me here. Tom groans as he says, "When they built that four-lane, they clear cut that forest and that's when everything started changing here. This was an amazon when I grew up." He says this area started flooding after the forest was clear cut, but adds that the cypress trees he's been planting will grow to act as a natural bulkhead. Tom stays optimistic, saying, "I think in some ways it's got to be better now. They're testing water. I never heard of anybody testing water when I grew up. We didn't have the amount of people here, either."

The trail starts looping back towards the boathouse when we come across the old wooden sailboat Tom and his friend Rick, the one he

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met in St. Petersberg, have been restoring. It's the very same sailboat Tom's daughters grew up on, and the one he now hopes to sail as he creates new memories with his grandson, Jack. Tom built the boat in 1983. It's made of juniper. He gives me a piece to smell as he tells me how juniper is a good wood to build a boat out of because it doesn't take up water. He goes on about how when he was building the boat, he was working with a third-generation moonshiner on the tugboat, so they'd drink moonshine while they were working on the wooden boat. He points out how the stem of the boat is made from mulberry.

I'm imagining all of the places Tom has been in this little wooden sailboat when I ask, "Out of all the places you've been, what is your favorite place?" Tom replies, "All of them. Favorite is a hard word because I love everywhere I've been. I tell you what, I love everywhere I am. How about that?"

As I prepare to leave and as Tom gets ready to go out in his Magnolia rowing-skiff replica, I think of how lucky we are that out of all the favorite places Tom has been, he always tumbles home to Mobile Bay.

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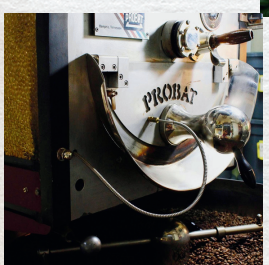

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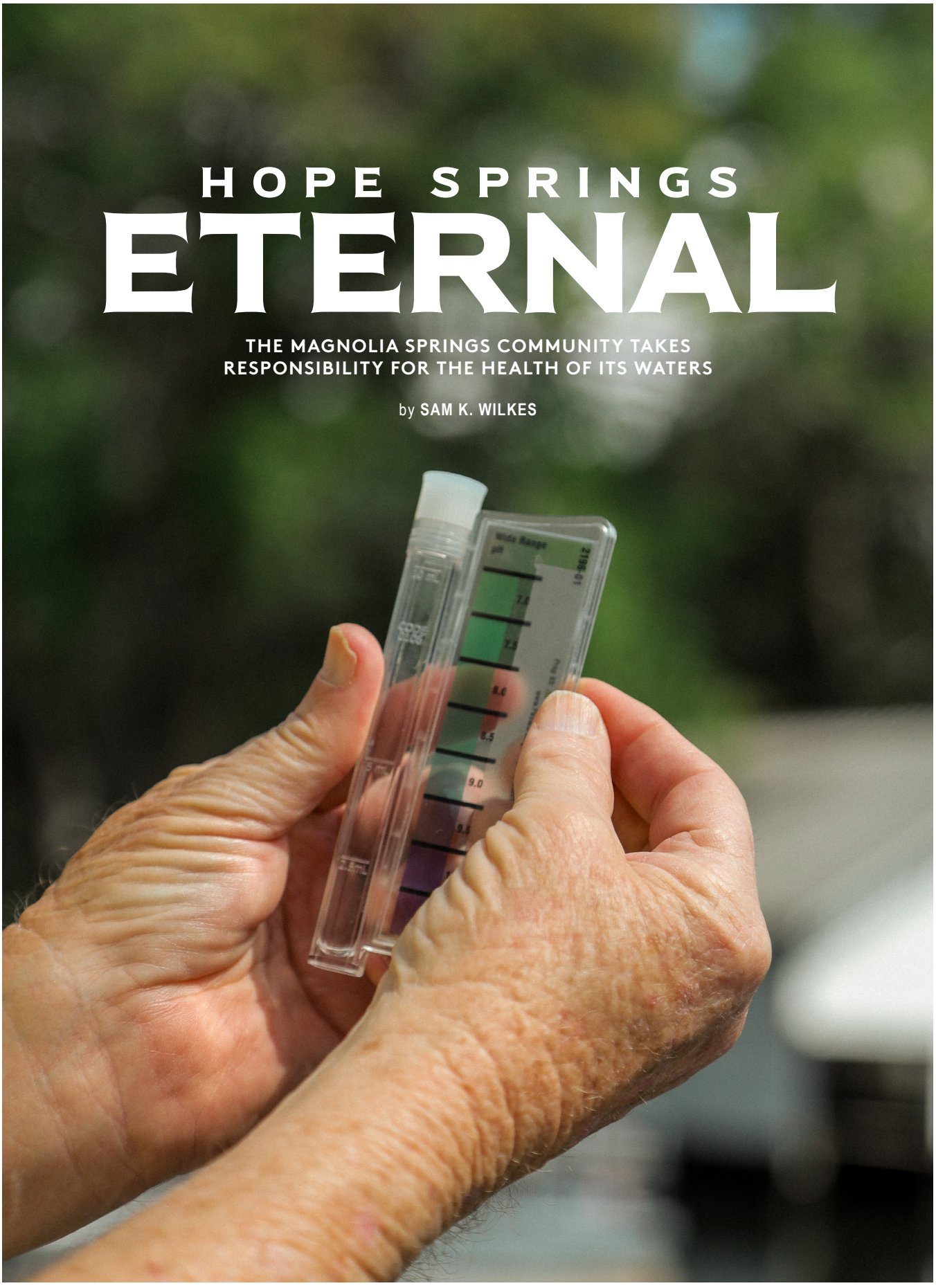
HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

THE MAGNOLIA SPRINGS COMMUNITY TAKES RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE HEALTH OF ITS WATERS

by **SAM K. WILKES**



There is only one town in the United States that receives its mail year-round by boat. So, it's easy to grasp the appreciation the Magnolia Springs community has for its waterway. The postal practice dates back to 1916 and is still going strong more than a 100 years later, except now it's done with a tiller outboard on an aluminum Jon boat loaded with crates of stamped mail, idling along the mailboxes perched on the docks.

But it's not just the mail route that connects the people of Magnolia Springs to the water. The first families settled around the Magnolia River because of its spring-fed nature. Rich in biodiversity, the Magnolia River is one of the chief sources of fresh water in Weeks Bay, flushing and replenishing itself regularly. The river has held a reputation for some of the nation's purest waters, from the days of the early settlers until recently in 2010, when it received the state's designation as an "Outstanding Alabama Water." This label recognizes the waterway's exceptional ecological significance and requires the state's highest protection status. The surrounding Town of Magnolia Springs, with roughly one-thousand residents, has managed to maintain most of its quaint charm over the decades, hidden from the encroaching sprawl under its veil of Spanish moss and tunnel of live oaks. Yet neither the town, nor the waters, are immune from all the effects of the outside world, especially those flowing downstream.

The town of Magnolia Springs

In 2025, a favorite swimming site, "Cold Hole," started showing signs of record-high bacteria levels. This historic part of the Magnolia River sits near the heart of the town, with a deep underwater cold spring that keeps it consistently cool and has provided relief to many locals for centuries during the sweltering summer heat. Mobile Baykeeper had contracted to test the waters at this site weekly. The Baykeeper SWIM report tested for *Enterococcus* and *E. coli*. Test results typically varied week to week, depending on rainfall amounts and other factors; however, the Cold Hole report had showed bacteria readings above 4,000 most probable number ("MPN"). (*In April, Mobile Baykeeper paused its SWIM water-quality monitoring program due to a lack of dedicated funding. We plan to resume the program once funding is secured.*)

The EPA considers water safe for swimming when the bacteria count is below 104 MPN per 100 mL of water. "While *Enterococcus* and *E. coli* in and of themselves are not necessarily dangerous, they are indicators that other more dangerous pathogens may be present," says Baykeeper staff scientist Cassie Bates. "If you swim in water with high levels of these bacteria, it could potentially cause some serious health issues."

Robert Turner has been residing in Magnolia Springs for more than 32 years. He's served on the town council for the past five years. Turner had seen the Baykeeper SWIM reports and had attended a neighboring Wolf Bay Water Watch meeting. "Baykeeper drew my attention to the testing aspect," he says, "and I knew of other water-watch groups, so I decided I wanted to get involved and keep an eye on our own watershed."

That decision led Turner to resurrect the "Magnolia River Alabama Water Watch" organization, a group that had not been in operation for roughly 15 years. Turner now serves as the director of the organization. And even though he has a double major in Biology and Chemistry, he had never used those degrees with his career. "I have no work experience related to this, just a passion for the watershed," he says. And Turner quickly learned he was not the only one. When Turner rekindled the organization in 2025, they started with only four volunteers, a group that has grown to 14 volunteer certified testers as of March 2026.

However, this is not simply townspeople signing up to stare at the water occasionally. The organization is affiliated with the Alabama Water Watch corporate group and requires all testers to go through several hours of rigorous training and classes. "The testing procedure is strict and controlled, which is why training is needed," says Turner. "But you do not necessarily have to have a science background to test. Anyone willing to be trained can be a tester. We just need concerned citizens."

The Town clerk, Hannah Driskell, was one of those concerned citizens and an initial volunteer with Turner. "I have lived in Magnolia Springs my whole life," says Hannah. "I went to school to be a paramedic right out of high school. I have an associate's degree in applied science, but no background in water testing."

Hannah and other locals, Lisa Mason-Sanders and Bill McFadden, started on the initial team with Turner in the spring of 2025. In addition to testing, Hannah helps coordinate the meetings and ensures the testing supplies are stocked. "Before becoming a certified tester, I had to complete a 4-hour online course and a 4-hour in-person course. We also have to be re-certified by the Alabama Water Watch every two years," says Hannah.

Volunteer Lisa Mason-Sanders had a background as a laboratory technician. After attending a presentation by Ashley Campbell of the Baldwin County Environmental Protection Agency and Johanna Gertsch of the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, Lisa decided to apply her skills to help preserve the health of their unique waterway.

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Robert Turner collecting test-samples

welcomed the small startup and have been very supportive. The organization receives some funding from the Town as well as the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, but it relies heavily on its volunteers and donations. The team tests the waterway once a month at 14 certified locations from near the head of the Magnolia River to the mouth, covering a span of roughly four miles. Each team member has their own assigned test location. "My spot is upriver at The Commons," says Hannah. "I don't have to use a boat to access my location, but some other team members do."

Baykeeper's SWIM program tested weekly in two spots along the Magnolia River, yet it only focused on bacteria levels, while the Magnolia River Water Watch team tests for bacteria as well as salinity levels, pH, oxygen levels, turbidity, and the overall chemical health of their waterway.

"Cassie Bates with Mobile Baykeeper has been a great help for us interpreting the data and tracking on maps," says Turner. The health of the water is not readily visible with the naked eye. "So, data is strength. All our test results are sent to Alabama Water Watch headquarters and that data is posted on their website monthly for the public."

Through Hannah's work on the team, she has learned first-hand how important data collection is to preservation. "The data we gather and submit can be used to identify unusual shifts in water quality or bacteria counts, help justify restoration projects, evaluate impacts of development or land-use changes, support zoning or conservation decisions, and help identify problem areas needing attention such as runoff, erosion, or septic issues," says Hannah. "Sharing the results with the community is very important to me. Because I know everyone in Magnolia Springs loves the Magnolia River. So, we encourage members of the community to be active in the health of our river, whether that is through volunteering with the team or being an advocate."

Some team members drive their boats and sample from the middle of the river, while others collect from areas closer to shore. Some do both. They each have their tackle box of professional-grade water-testing tools and perform the chemical tests on site, which include measuring the oxygen, pH, turbidity, and salinity levels. The team uses salinity refractometers that look like rifle scopes to measure the salt, as salinity levels can dictate the growth rates of certain bacteria and provide other water health indicators. The Magnolia River typically contains mostly freshwater due to its spring-fed nature. However, sometimes with the right current or winds, the brackish waters of Mobile Bay and Weeks Bay will push up into the river.

After testing and recording the salinity, oxygen, pH, and turbidity levels, each team member lowers into the river a latched container that holds inside two uncontaminated glass bottles in order to collect a final water sample with no exposure to the air or human touch. The containers securing the two bottles are then taken to Town Hall, where the team extracts a sample with a sterilized pipette and tests it on a Roth Biochemical card. Three Roth cards are used for each testing site. Finally, they place the test cards into a pre-heated incubator for 24 hours and wait for the results. If blue spots appear, then *E. coli* is present. The amount is then measured against the EPA's recommended guidelines for human safety of below 104 MPN per 100 mL of water. Recent bacteria results near the head of the river have shocked some of the team members, which only fuels their continued efforts to educate the public.

In addition to the monthly tests, the group meets every two months and then conferences quarterly with a Task Force Team which includes ADEM, the Mobile Bay NEP, the state's Department of Agriculture, and Foley's Environmental Department. The initial goal of the Magnolia River Alabama Water Watch was to obtain a year's worth of data on the river to provide a baseline and overall picture of the health of the waterway. However, this data has also assisted with source tracking pollutants for ADEM and Foley's Environmental Department. "We sourced three dirt pits causing issues at the head of the Magnolia River," says Turner, "and have been able to

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close those recently which has helped the river a great deal."

However, Turner stresses that this organization was not developed to be a punitive organization. "We're not playing sheriff, but we do want to help open the public's eyes to problems," says Turner. "We believe if we find pollutant sources and document them clearly, then most people will work to resolve the problem. As an analogy, if your neighbor's septic tank is leaking and causing problems in the neighborhood, your goal is not to call the sheriff and punish them, rather you want to inform your neighbor so the problem can be remedied for the good of both properties and the community."

As the old sayings go, we know what rolls downhill and what flows downstream. As Baldwin County grows rapidly, the downstream flow only becomes more complex for this historically pristine waterway and productive estuary. Turner and team are dedicated to protecting the river's "Outstanding Alabama Water" designation. The state designation aids in those protection efforts, but it often takes community members and grassroot movements to sustain real action. That aspect gives Turner hope for the future of the organization.

"The community has accepted the cause and we're getting more and more volunteers weekly. We'd like to add more test sites and explore multiple grant opportunities," says Turner. "But most importantly, our voice is now being heard statewide. The river is the main artery to the heart of this town, so we have no choice but to keep it alive and well."

A view of the springs

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Mobile Baykeeper of 97 years

ANCIENT WAYS

OYSTER REEFS ONCE SUSTAINED THE INDIGENOUS TRIBES OF COASTAL ALABAMA. BAYKEEPER'S OYSTER RESTORATION PROJECT AIMS TO BRING THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER AND REVIVE WHAT'S BEEN LOST.

by **CAINE O'REAR**
photos by **COURTNEY MASON and CAINE O'REAR**

Photo/CO

"We're out here looking for old, ancient Indian reefs. Indians lived in them woods, come out here with pirogues. It's how they fed their families. You'll find pottery here, mixed in with this stuff, when you get in on these little oyster reefs. You'll find all kinds of old Indian pottery. And if you want to go fishing, this is the place."

That's Michael Williams talking — or better yet, evangelizing — in his characteristically sandpaper rasp. He's a local oysterman and shrimper of more than thirty years who, along with his wife Kerry Mitchell, make up Salty Pirates Seafood. The pair also spearhead the Alabama Commercial Fishermen Association and have long been advocates for seafood sustainability and reef restoration.

It's a mild day in the middle of April, and we're on Heron Bay in Michael's motorized flatboat, navigating through the marshes and tidal creeks, which today are brimming with shrimp and redfish. Michael proudly calls this his "backyard," as you can see his house on the Bay from where we sit. Heron Bay lies just west of the Dauphin Island causeway, near Cedar Point, right before you hit the bridge that takes you to the island. The area is a pristine stretch of coastal marsh and maritime forest that runs just shy of 500 acres. On a tranquil morning like this, one imagines it doesn't look too different from the prehistoric days when indigenous tribes populated the waters and drew their sustenance from it. Or like it did centuries later, when Union troops bivouacked along the Bay in the summer of 1864 and feasted on the seemingly endless beds of oysters while mosquitos — Rebel bugs love Yankee blood — feasted on them. And yet still, even today, Heron Bay feels like a sanctuary from the threats that plague so much of the watershed, and one can't help but think that more of our waters should look like this, if only the effort was made. "This is what the rest of our waters could look like if we took care of it," Michael says.

Today's mission involves depositing hundreds of pounds of shell as part of a large-scale initiative to build new reefs. The shell that's being deposited on existing reefs will serve as the foundation to develop more substrate, upon which Baykeeper will add more shell to allow baby oysters — or larvae — to form and flourish. This is known as recruitment, or attracting "spat on shell."

It's just one day in the life of Mobile Baykeeper's Holistic Oyster Restoration project, run by Baykeeper's own Dr. Kayla Boyd — her "dream job," she says — who is frequently out in the field with project partners and oystermen like Michael. A Wisconsin native, Kayla earned her PhD from Auburn University in Fisheries, Aquaculture, and Aquatic Sciences, studying how the environment impacted oyster health in the Gulf of Mexico through lab and field work. Boyd says it was the resiliency of oysters that drew her to the bivalves in the first place. "They're a complicated animal," she says. "They are simultaneously very tolerant to environmental changes, but also sensitive to certain stress combinations at the same time."

That resiliency is a good metaphor for the Oyster Restoration Project itself.

"I've come to understand that perseverance in the face of adversity is what is needed to see a massive project like this move forward." Boyd explains. "I don't mean just myself, but, much like the resiliency of the oyster, the tenacity of the oyster community is something I've always respected, and to see it enacted through this project, and through the Alabama Commercial Fishermen Association's work, has been awe-inspiring and encourages me to reach for grander goals."

For 2026, Baykeeper plans to plant 500,000 oysters for restoration, as well as permit 50 oyster restoration plots across coastal Alabama. The goal is to accrue additional larvae to support the growth and rebound of the public reef.

"Today was the first day we put shell out here to build the foundations for new oyster reefs up in Heron Bay," Boyd says. "The shell we put out here will serve as the foundation that we can continue to put baby oysters on top of, so they won't sink."

Since the 1950s, it is estimated that Mobile Bay has lost roughly 85 percent of its oyster population — a

Dr. Kayla Boyd unloads hundreds of pounds of shell for reef restoration. Photo/CO

Williams and Boyd deposit shells on firm bay bottom. Photo/CO

staggering decline brought on by predation by drills (small predatory marine snails), historically unsustainable harvesting practices, shell-dredging for construction materials, and ship channel dredging.

Yet this spring saw progress in restoring the Bay's oyster population, as part of Baykeeper's collaboration with the Alabama Commercial Fishermen Association, Fish Tec, and other groups. Together, the collective has built 13 oyster reefs out of its planned 28 for the year. Locations for planting were prioritized based on several factors, including natural shoreline, salinity regimes, proximity to publicly harvested reefs, historic oyster presence, land ownership, and public interest. Other than Heron Bay, locations include nearby Portersville Bay, Bayou la Batre, Mon Luis Island, and Dauphin Island, among others.

To kick off the initial planting, Isle Dauphine Oyster Company donated hundreds of pounds of shell (the program also uses shell from Alabama Coastal Foundation's recycling program), while Fairhope Roasting Company donated the burlap sacks that volunteers tirelessly filled. And special thanks goes to the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, who greenlit the project and made it all possible. "This project shows what can happen when the community comes together to take responsibility for the health of our waters," Boyd says.

Oyster restoration in coastal Alabama will not be easy; its current obstacles include a lack of permitted oyster restoration locations, a lack of industry involvement in the restoration process, and a lack of commercially available spat-on-shell to be used for restoration.

"There are many bottlenecks, including a lack of a long-term vision for oyster restoration outcomes," Boyd says. "There have been many unforeseen roadblocks when it comes to permitting, which has been the biggest challenge. When I run up against a wall that prevents an initiative from moving forward, it can delay oysters going in the water for months. However, as I'm working on this project with different agencies, navigating these processes is getting easier. I thank the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Alabama Department of Public Health for helping this project clear those obstacles to move forward."

> **"Industry and environmental balance is the unique feature to this project. The language of oysters is universal, regardless of industry or state-line boundaries."**
>
> **— KAYLA BOYD, BAYKEEPER'S OYSTER PROJECT MANAGER**

Challenges aside, today is a fun day to be out on the water — the kind of life-affirming spring day we often get before the tropical heat arrives. Michael's boat sprung a leak earlier in the morning, but he's assured us he patched it. It's an old boat that he's had for five years, and he says it's the first time he's had any trouble with it.

"I work it a lot, and with a wooden boat, when you work it a lot, it's gonna leak," he says. "It's a pirogue, man. I told you I'm like an Indian. How long since the Indians was in here? 200 years?"

The Troubles

Alabama's 2025-2026 wild harvesting season was a short one. It closed in late December 2025, marking one of the worst harvesting seasons in a decade. The Marine Resources Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources reported that ap-

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Boyd and the team deposit shells on a shoreline reef. Photo/CM

proximately 5,000 sacks of oysters were harvested, totaling 425,000 pounds with an estimated dockside value of roughly $170,000. Compare that to 2020-2021, which saw more than 22,000 sacks harvested, making that season one of the best in recent memory.

At the time of this season's closing, Kevin Anson, director of MRD, said low salinity and low dissolved oxygen levels, brought on by higher-than-normal water temperatures, were to blame. "These events negatively affect young oysters more than adult oysters and appear to have significantly reduced survival rates for very young oysters," he said. "Since it takes a minimum of 18 months for an oyster to reach harvestable size, we anticipate a lower number of adult oysters on Alabama's reefs in 2026."

Back in September 2025, the MRD hosted its annual meeting in Bayou La Batre, where it discussed the state of the oystery and guidelines for this year's harvesting season. Prior to the get-together (which usually involves a fair amount of tension and even some shouting from the crowd), rumors circulated that the season would be shut down entirely.

"Even though we've had several years of better harvest, we're not where we want to be, we're not where we were," Jason Herrmann, a biologist with MRD, told the crowd. He stressed that the most concerning part of the 2024 preliminary data concerned the drop in spat. "Gotta have the babies to have the reef thrive," he said.

Whether there will be a season in 2026-2027 remains to be seen.

Living Reefs

Laura Solinger-Phillips is a fish biologist for NOAA. While her professional duties with the agency mostly concern entanglement mortality for the North Atlantic right whale, her doctoral studies at the University of Southern Mississippi dealt with oyster restoration, and she has been a staunch advocate for Baykeeper's holistic oyster restoration project.

'There are so many factors that are potentially catastrophic to oysters," she says. "If it's a hurricane, dredging in the Bay, or it's really hot — you've got diseases down here. It's a really difficult situation. I'm not envious of our fishermen or managers and the decisions they're faced with. Our stock is not in great shape, and it hasn't been in a while."

Solinger notes that you have to support the calcium content of the reefs, but also create a living system of oysters that can continue to contribute shell and calcium back to the habitat for future shell to live on — an effort that is being undertaken by Baykeeper and one she is duly impressed with.

"You can spend millions of dollars planting, and maybe you get one or two years of good spat development. But if you haven't supported the environment enough to create a living oyster reef, that effort is quickly eroded."

Oyster Keepers

In addition to its holistic restoration efforts, Mobile Baykeeper runs the Oyster Keepers Program, a hands-on reef restoration initiative that engages the community by activating waterfront property owners' docks and piers to host an adult reef. The oysters are suspended in cages year-round and produce the larvae that seed new reefs. Each cage has the potential to produce 100,000,000 oyster larvae per year and filter 2,000 gallons of water per day.

Boyd on the Dauphin Island causeway, near Heron Bay. Photo/CM

Baykeeper has secured all the piers needed for 2026, but anyone wanting to be part of Oyster Keepers in the years ahead can sign up for our newsletter at MobileBaykeeper.org to stay connected. We are working toward a goal of planting five million oysters by 2028, and it's the community that helps move that goal within reach.

Coda

Recent research suggests the ancient reefs were not only a food source for the Native Americans that populated the southern coasts, but also the linchpin of ecological balance, with harvesting practices that sustained reefs and oyster populations for millennia.

In a 2020 paper published in the journal *Science Advances*,["Ecosystem stability and Native American oyster harvesting along the Atlantic Coast of the United States"], the authors noted that "despite intensive harvesting of these fishes [by Native Americans along the Georgia and South Carolina coasts], for the most part, such practices were sustainable over long periods, indicating ... that some form of social control and management of resources occurred along the coast. Adaptive controls, such as common pool management and proprietorship over beds, likely emerged with the onset of village formation along the coast as populations moved into productive new areas where resources could be procured."

The study clearly suggests that Native Americans worked together and were highly organized when it came to oyster harvesting — something we've failed to achieve in the modern era.

Centuries later, accounts of Union soldiers stationed in coastal Alabama during the Civil War testify to the bounty of reefs that existed in Heron Bay and Cedar Point, an interesting slice of history documented in historian Paul Brueske's book *The Last Siege: The Mobile Campaign, Alabama 1865*. "[We'd] wade for oysters in the shallow pond above the cove, and forget our baked heads and cut and bruised feet, in the tantalizing prospect of fried oysters for supper ... but the novelty would not last forever," wrote Andrew F. Sperry of the 33rd Iowa Volunteer Infantry.

Sperry's experience sounds like something worth returning to. Mobile Baykeeper's mission is to defend and revive the health of the waters of coastal Alabama, and one of our markers of success is seeing the community take responsibility for the health of its waters.

"One of the encouraging aspects of the Oyster Restoration Project is that it is community-driven and led by a variety of stakeholders," Boyd says. "This project is not only restoring ecosystem functionality, but it also provides support for the commercial oyster fishery. Industry and environmental balance is the unique feature to this project. The language of oysters is universal, regardless of industry or state-line boundaries. Having the support of various stakeholders, and to see groups working together to make every shell that goes in the water have the maximum potential for success, is worth more than anything."

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Wilderness Medicine

USA'S LYNN YONGE TAKES HIS MED STUDENTS INTO THE HEART OF THE DELTA FOR A WEEK-LONG EDUCATION COURSE

by **CORI YONGE**
photos by **CAINE O'REAR** and **CORI YONGE**

USA med students make camp along the Tensaw

The campsite. Photo/CY

After the flurry of loading the canoes — squeezing black Pelican boxes and ice chests between thwarts, stuffing dry bags under seats, and beaching the boats at the water's edge — my husband, Lynn Yonge, motions us over. "Welcome to Rice Creek," he announces as he steps into the shade at the gravel boat launch, instructs his students to gather close, and traces his finger along a map of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta. I lean in with the others as he points out the broad blue curve of the Tensaw River, its narrow tributaries, and oxbow lakes that will be our wilderness classroom for the next five days.

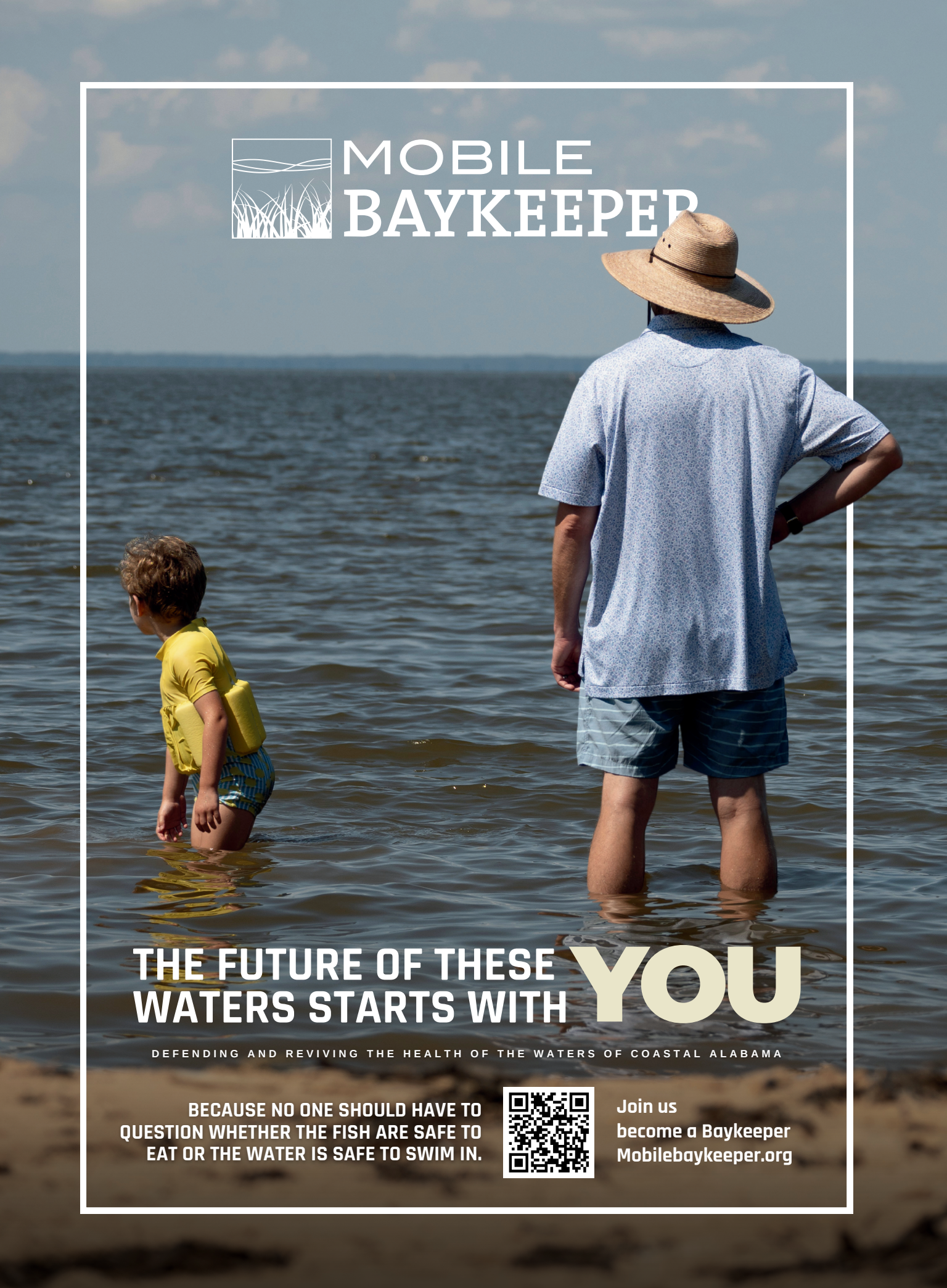
The expedition is the culmination of a month of training for fourth-year medical students who have chosen to learn the fundamentals of wilderness medicine. Lynn is a family physician and Director of Wilderness Medicine for the University of South Alabama's Department of Emergency Medicine. Each spring, he and his colleagues, USA emergency physicians Raymond McGuire and Walker Plash, train two classes of students to respond to natural disasters, humanitarian crises, and search and rescue. It's a lot to learn in a short period of time. In part, because, for a majority of students, primitive camping is a novel experience.

In the weeks before their Delta expedition, the students meet at a private lodge in Washington County. Off the grid they spend one weekend learning how to set up a tent, build a fire, paddle a canoe, and dig a latrine. Twelve years as a Girl Scout leader means I have the joy of teaching them how to cook on a camp stove and over a fire. The following weekend, a generator powers technology as the future doctors crowd into a makeshift classroom listening to lectures on how to practice medicine without modern conveniences. Lessons include how to apply a tourniquet, splint a broken bone, sterilize water, and irrigate wounds in the wilderness.

"The focus for me is to teach them how to survive in austere conditions so they can be the ones to respond to a catastrophe, not the ones who evacuate from it," Lynn says.

In south Alabama, there's no better place to practice austere conditions than the swamps and bottomlands of the Delta. Now in its fifteenth year, the course is one of the only water-based wilderness medicine programs in the United States. "It's our wilderness, it's accessible," Lynn explains. "We may not have altitude but we have alligators. And we have our own weather-related challenges. It may not be a blizzard, but it could be a flood."

To be sure, no two trips in the Delta are ever the same. I know this firsthand from previous excursions on the Bartram Canoe Trail where we paddled against the wind and tide, white caps breaking over the bow of our canoe. Despite the threat of fickle tides and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Lynn and Cori Yonge (far right) with the wilderness medicine class. Photo/CY

Lynn Yonge maps the route for the week. Photo/CO

Photo/CO

blustery spring conditions, I decide to tag along with this expedition, figuring the tranquility of limited cell service would override any bad weather. The weather was beautiful. The mud not so much.

In the week leading up to the expedition, Lynn studied tide tables and water levels. The worst drought in almost 20 years challenged the previous month's class. Putting in at Rice Creek, he says, was gambling on a three-day fall, hoping we would have enough water elevation to defeat the incoming tide.

The students were in high spirits as we pushed off into the shallow water. They marveled at the banks of towering bald cypress and took note of the alligator silently crossing our path. They made camp that night on a patch of high ground, proud of the day's accomplishments. "I had never paddled a loaded boat before. I was in the bow so I can't complain, but it was still hard," Sonia Patel tells me as we relax near the campfire.

The expedition's most taxing lessons would come in the morning. Waking to the baritone hoots of a barred owl amplified in the misty air, we quickly discovered low water and a mat of thick mud and cypress knees between us and the lake. The students would need to load and launch the canoes one at a time, being careful not to slip or lose their boots in the unforgiving muck. Raymond McGuire, Assistant Professor of Emergency Medicine and a long time outdoor guide, says it's the stuff that makes the Delta a great classroom: teaching the students teamwork, communication, and respect for one another. Skills necessary in both hospital and austere medical settings. "It makes you not just a better doctor, but changes your life for the better," McGuire explains. "It gives them a boost of real-life confidence where they see themselves doing things they never thought would be possible."

And if conquering the mud wasn't enough to boost their confidence, a fallen cypress tree blocking the entrance to a creek did the job later that morning. It lay on its side, in low water, exposed roots high in the air. The students could wait two hours for the water to rise or figure it out. The most experienced campers went first. With their help, we followed one by one. Shedding our boots and socks, we scrambled onto the slippery tree, pulled our boat over the log, and climbed back into the canoe. It was the kind of problem solving that inspires Connor White, who says he signed

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up for the class because he likes the idea of doing the most with what little you've got. "The biggest thing, and I think we did it really well, was when we encountered an obstacle, everybody stopped. We made a plan, executed a plan, and we were safe about it."

While the expedition wasn't a vacation, it wasn't all work. On the third afternoon, the group had a chance to take it easy. Some chose to bask in the sun while others sat in the shade reading or whittling sticks. Everyone took a bucket bath or a dip in the water, reveling in the feeling of clean skin and a fresh set of clothes. Associate Professor of Emergency Medicine Walker Plash says this kind of downtime and outdoor exposure is important for physicians. "Wellness is huge in the medical education space, whether residency education or medical student education. Maintaining wellness, preventing burnout, and resiliency are important. And I think there's a big tie-in with wilderness medicine." The students agreed, sending up a chorus of "no's" when I asked if they would trade their time in the wilderness for the office.

By the final morning, the med students have boat loading down to a science. Plash gives them instructions on what to expect once we reach the take-out at Cloverleaf Landing. Then we're off, paddling south on the slick waters of the Tensaw River. We circle up to share our high points and low points. It's clear everyone will take away both knowledge and a new appreciation for the ups-and-downs of a challenging environment. "It taught me to be humble," says Melissa Ziprick. "You can think you're really prepared but, until you've done it, you don't know. It was good for me."

As three osprey soar overhead, scolding our convoy of canoes, McGuire reminds the group the trip is coming to an end. "Then life becomes intrusive," he says. "Just enjoy the last four miles." Once again, the Delta has done its job as a classroom. C

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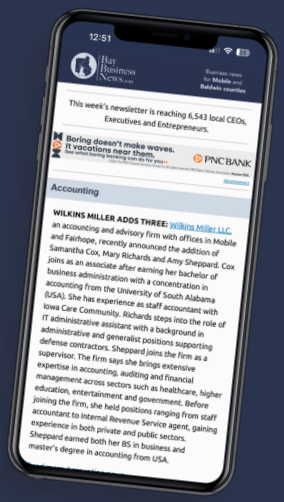
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WILKINS MILLER ADDS THREE: Wilkins Miller LLC, an accounting and advisory firm with offices in Mobile and Fairhope, recently announced the addition of Samantha Cox, Mary Richards and Amy Sheppard. Cox joins as an associate after earning her bachelor of business administration with a concentration in accounting from the University of South Alabama (USA). She has experience as staff accountant with Iowa Care Community. Richards steps into the role of IT administrative assistant with a background in administrative and generalist positions supporting defense contractors. Sheppard joins the firm as a supervisor. The firm says she brings extensive expertise in accounting, auditing and financial management across sectors such as healthcare, higher education, entertainment and government. Before joining the firm, she held positions ranging from staff accountant to Internal Revenue Service agent, gaining experience in both private and public sectors. Sheppard earned both her BS in business and master's degree in accounting from USA.

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West Indies Salad
from Little Bird

LITTLE BIRD IS LOCATED AT 404 OAK AVENUE IN FAIRHOPE

INGREDIENTS

2 lb jumbo lump crab

WEST INDIES MARINADE
¼ cup minced shallots
½ cup canola oil
½ cup apple cider vinegar
1 tbsp kosher salt
Zest of **1** lemon
Zest of **2** preserved lemons (minced)
¾ cup sushi vinegar

SUSHI VINEGAR
6 tbsp rice wine vinegar
6 tbsp granulated sugar

FIRECRACKERS
1 box saltine crackers
1 package ranch powder
1 tbsp garlic powder
1 tbsp onion powder
1 tsp red pepper flakes
1 cup canola oil

DIRECTIONS

WEST INDIES MARINADE - Mix all ingredients together with lump crab and refrigerate overnight.

SUSHI VINEGAR - Bring to boil, melt sugar, and cool.

FIRECRACKERS - Mix dry ingredients. In mixing bowl, mix crackers with dry ingredients and oil until coated. Toast in oven at 300 degrees for 3 minutes.

PURPLE MARTINS RETURN TO BAHÍA DEL ESPÍRITU SANTO

text and photo by **SUSAN ROUILLIER**

They returned today, February twenty-eighth,
as if the date was inked in an invisible journal
long before we began keeping track of such things.

First was the scout, alone against the pale morning.
He circled the tiny houses by Mobile Bay —
gourds swaying lightly in the brackish air,
small compartments waiting like unopened letters.

He hovered at each doorway, looked inside,
tilted his head to measure the quiet —
last year's dust, a stray feather, the faint shape of memory.

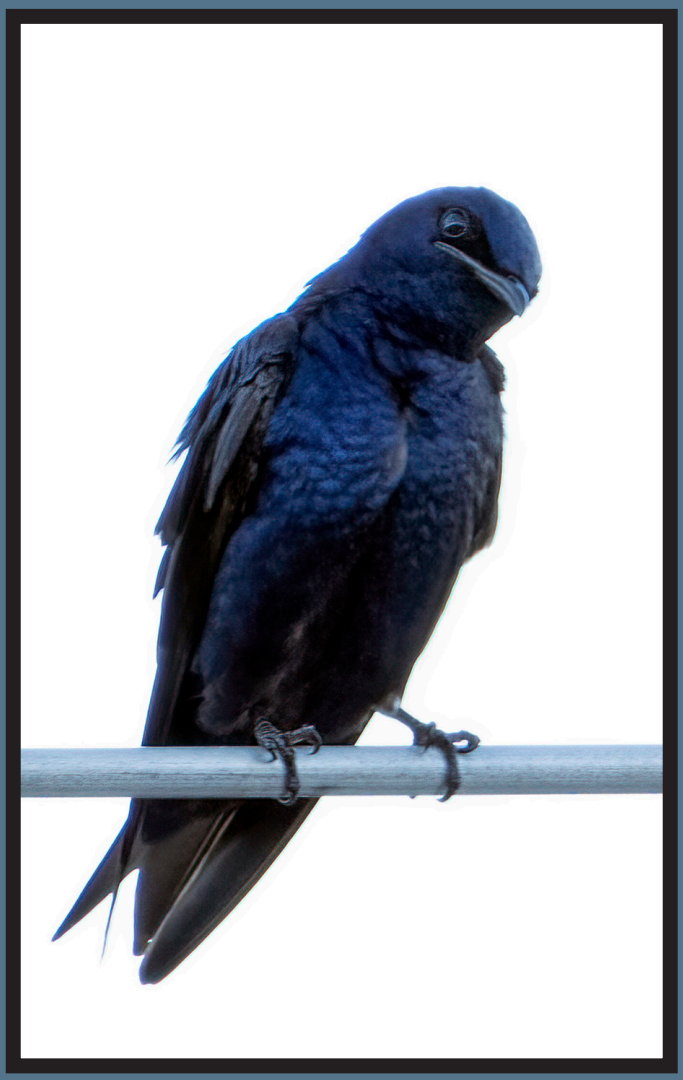
Satisfied, he rose higher,
turned toward the south,
and carried the message in his wings.

Not long after, they arrived —
a rush of dark purple against the sky.
The Bay held them gently.
Water shone beneath their arcs.
Even marsh grasses seemed to lean closer
to witness the reunion.

They sang together — joyful, busy and reassuring,
voices spilling chatter into the air.
No hesitation — they flew straight through the openings,
as if stepping back to their own bedrooms
after a long, patient journey.

February twenty-eighth, precise and unannounced,
a covenant older than clocks, truer than our forecasts.

We, standing below, felt the soft relief
of something returning exactly when it should.
Underneath it all is a tender reassurance —
that life remembers how to continue,
and beauty is not finished with us yet.



Capt. Tom Yeager leads Rachel Ball through the woods near his home on Fly Creek

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